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SUBJECT: SUSPECT FOUND GUILTY OF MURDER OF SON OF PROMINENT HUMAN RIGHTS ACTIVIST

¶1. On June 2, a Guatemalan court sentenced Erwin Omar Gudiel Arias to 20 years in prison for the August 2007 murder of Jose Mendez Dardon, son of prominent human rights activist and former Congressman Amilcar Mendez. The three-judge panel found conclusive the testimony of two witnesses who were at the scene of the crime and a ballistics report that established that the bullets that killed Mendez were fired at close range. Gudiel, a colleague and friend of Mendez, was in the vehicle Mendez was driving at the time of the shooting.

¶2. The three-judge panel called several witnesses, including the defendant and the victim's widow and father, during the two-week trial which began May 14. In his testimony, Gudiel, the sole suspect in the case, maintained his innocence despite conflicting testimony of other witnesses. In press interviews, he claimed that he was framed. No other suspects have been apprehended.

¶3. Amilcar Mendez expressed his satisfaction with the court's decision. He said it was an important step toward achieving justice and expressed his gratitude to the Embassy for its support over the past year.

¶4. Comment: This case is significant in that it represents one of the less than 2 percent of cases successfully prosecuted through the Guatemalan criminal court system. Amilcar Mendez' prominence as a former member of Congress and human rights activist, his perseverance, and international attention and support, including FBI assistance, were instrumental in achieving resolution of this case.

Derham